Our life together: Four practices of healthy congregations

by Christine D. Pohl in the March 7, 2012 issue

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The breakdown could have been avoided. But then, few breakdowns in community are inevitable. In this case, some folks made several poor decisions. Other people responded poorly to the poor decisions. Words were exchanged, positions hardened, sides were drawn up. Rumors flew, and even when folks knew they were rumors, they repeated them until it was very difficult to discern what had really happened.

People were angry and hurt; some conversations stopped, and new alliances were formed. Only certain people knew about key meetings. A lot of energy was expended in determining motives, justifying decisions and anticipating the opposition's next move. Regular activities continued, but the life was drained out of them; everything seemed hollow. Small acts and casual comments were freighted with huge symbolic meaning. Everyone felt undervalued and betrayed by someone; a number of people threatened to leave. The meltdown had taken on a life of its own.

When these sorts of breakdowns happen in Christian communities, the costs go beyond the shattering of valued relationships, important projects or a shared future.

The best testimony to the truth of the gospel is the quality of our life together. Jesus risked his reputation and the credibility of his story by tying them to how his followers live and care for one another in community (John 17:20–23).

If we could cut through our complacency or despair, we might be shocked by what is really at stake here. The character of our shared life in congregations, communities and families has the power to draw people to the kingdom or to push them away. How we live together is the most persuasive sermon we'll ever get to preach.

The beauty of loving communities does not replace the importance of the verbal proclamation of the gospel, but Jesus explicitly linked the truth of his life and message to our life together. The Word who became flesh and lived among us, full of grace and truth, expects that our relationships with one another will also be characterized by grace and truth. And so, for 2,000 years, Jesus' followers have been forming communities built and sustained by love, though also fractured by sin and corruption.

The desire to be part of communities that are vibrant, caring and faithful keeps us working at the task of building and repairing congregations. Growing into the likeness of Christ and into the church as it is supposed to be cannot be separated from the messiness and disappointments that are part of human relationships. We can protect ourselves from such difficulties only by cutting ourselves off from our relationships, and that is rarely a satisfactory option.

We can build and maintain congregations—just like we do with marriages, families, monastic communities and businesses—in better and worse ways. Good communities and life-giving congregations emerge at the intersection of divine grace and steady human effort.

Often the ways that we've been formed by church and culture have not given us the skills or virtues we need to be part of the very communities we long for and try to create. While we might want community, it is often community on our terms, with easy entrances and exits, lots of choices and support and minimal responsibilities. Mixed together, this is not a promising recipe for strong or lasting communities.

When I've asked students and friends to describe an experience of community, they often tell stories about a time of intense emotional bonding with a group of people: a weekend retreat that was deeply affirming, a camping trip with friends, or a short-term mission project where participants began to feel like family. Such experiences

of community tend to be brief, occasional and deeply felt.

Communities in which we grow and flourish, however, are ones that last over time and are built by people who are faithful to one another and committed to a shared purpose. Community life certainly has moments of incredible beauty and intense personal connection, but much of it is daily and ordinary. Our lives are knit together not so much by intense feeling as by shared history, tasks, commitments, stories and sacrifices.

Yet communities need more than shared history and tasks to endure. A combination of grace, fidelity and truth makes communities safe enough for people to take the risks that are necessary for growth and transformation. In reflecting on what builds up and what breaks down communities, acts of fidelity and betrayal, truthfulness and deception, gratitude, envy, grumbling, welcome and exclusion often come to mind. Every community has practices that hold it together, and a framework that focuses on practices allows us to get at the moral and theological commitments that structure our relationships. For Christians, practices can be understood as responses to the grace we have already experienced in Christ, in light of the word and work of God and for the sake of one another and the world. (This definition is offered by Craig Dykstra and Dorothy C. Bass in *Practicing Theology,* edited by Bass with Miroslav Volf.)

The practices of expressing gratitude, making and keeping promises, living and speaking truthfully and offering hospitality are particularly important for sustaining communities. Some aspect of each of these practices is evident in almost every group of people whose connections or interactions with one another are more than temporary. Each of the practices is important to the biblical story and to expectations about the ways in which the people of God should live. Each is also at the heart of God's character and activity: we worship a God who is faithful and true, gracious and welcoming.

These four practices do not address every aspect of community life, but they do hold together and intersect in surprising ways. When communities offer hospitality to strangers, they soon discover the importance of truthfulness, gratitude and fidelity. Speaking truthfully is difficult and often risky in the absence of commitment or fidelity to one another. Gratitude without truthfulness looks a lot like a manipulative form of flattery.

Wisdom and experience teach us that what is noticed and celebrated is usually also repeated. To build stronger congregations and communities, we'll need to get in the habit of recognizing the practices that undergird our relationships and our life together. We can no longer afford to take them for granted.

Expressing gratitude

Gratitude begins with paying attention, with noticing the goodness, beauty and grace around us. The practice of gratitude becomes more central to our communities when we stop feeding the cycles of complaint and orient our lives around praise, testimony and thanks. Communities flourish when we regularly tell stories of God's faithfulness and goodness and when we find opportunities to express gratitude and celebrate the gifts we have received.

We can learn from those who have already made gratitude central to their shared life. Keith Wasserman provides details about how Good Works, Inc., a ministry with homeless people, embodies gratitude: every evening, when staff members, volunteers and residents gather for dinner, each one shares a brief explanation of something for which they are grateful. Keith has found that as they make time to listen to one another and to celebrate the gift of food, a different tone is set and opportunities for conversation increase. The act of gratitude, he observes, is contagious and builds community while lowering the level of complaining.

Members of several congregations have taken up a challenge to speak a word of gratitude and blessing into the lives of the first several people they encounter each day. Finding ways to bless others in small, daily words of appreciation—learning to "catch them in the act of being a gift," as one person put it—can transform communities into places in which we are delighted to live.

Small changes in practice can shift the culture of a community. One pastor I met decided to devote a major portion of the church's annual meeting to thanking everyone who had made a contribution to congregational life. Judy Alexander, who is experienced in helping community life to flourish, suggests that every meeting should have "far more positive affirmation than negative confrontation" and should include talk "about how we saw God at work in each other" (quoted in *Grace Matters,* by Chris Rice).

Like gratitude, celebration nourishes us in surprising ways, as Jean Vanier points out: "It makes present the goals of the community in symbolic form, and so brings hope and a new strength to take up again everyday life with more love. Celebration is a sign of the resurrection which gives us strength to carry the cross of each day" (*Community and Growth*).

Keeping promises

Fidelity in small things adds up to a way of life that is whole; betrayal breaks our lives and relationships into pieces. When we break promises, we betray relationships and erode community. Small betrayals often do a surprising amount of damage.

Theologians have frequently viewed betrayal as a grave sin. For John Calvin, unfaithfulness or infidelity is at the root of the fall—and ambition, pride and ingratitude are some of its bitter fruits. In Dante's *Inferno,* the ninth and lowest circle is for those who betray what they should be most faithful to. Despite recognition of its gravity, we have tended to overlook the impact of betrayal on community life—until, that is, we are faced with its deeply destructive consequences.

Our fidelities are often deeply intertwined. When a married couple begins a church plant, their marriage and the future of the church become linked. If, after several years, the couple divorces, the community is also at risk of being torn apart because of the relationships that are affected. The one rupture cannot be isolated; it bleeds into other marriages and friendships. The community then struggles to sort out faithfulness under these new circumstances.

When we are on the receiving end of failed promises but do not see a justification or excuse for them, we feel betrayed. Betrayal is devastating to our trust and sense of justice—and sometimes to our faith.

Christian workers sometimes overlook small infidelities or deceptions, assuming they won't matter in the grand scheme of things. Because we are involved in important work "for the kingdom," we imagine that accountability and fidelity somehow matter less. Ironically, the self-confidence that derives from being connected with God's purposes in the world can make us very vulnerable to careless expressions of infidelity.

Because of the impact of betrayal on trust and relationships, we are often harsh with those who break significant promises or violate commitments. But most of us fail in

some commitment, in small or large ways. In the messiest situations, there are multiple betrayals, and it is not necessarily clear who betrayed whom. Instead of responding to sin or human weakness redemptively, some communities in effect shoot their wounded. The most fragile folks are often also the most vulnerable in these settings. How we respond to betrayal and continue in love becomes a major test of individual and communal character.

Redemptive responses to misconduct involve patience, confession, correction, forgiveness and accountability within community. Sometimes it is appropriate for the community to ask whether it had a role in the betrayal. Would the failure have been less likely if structures of accountability had been in place?

Living truthfully

To know Jesus as the truth means that personal and relational aspects of truth and truthfulness deserve full attention. When we allow God's grace, truth, love and righteousness to be the framework for interpreting community life, we are in a better position to address sins and failures.

It can be risky to take the lead in creating a truthful environment. When we publicly acknowledge our frailties or temptations, other people, if they choose, can take advantage of our transparency and vulnerability. And we sometimes worry that our witness to the power and truth of the gospel will be discredited if we reveal the troubled or troubling aspects of our lives and communities. We want people to think we are good as well as good at what we do. We fear that if they knew the truth about us, they would be deeply disappointed or disinterested in the good news of Christ. Duplicity is a common response when expectations are impossible or unyielding.

Addressing hard truths in another person's life can also be costly because it can threaten the relationship. Fear of tension and loss often inhibit our willingness to speak truthfully. If we ignore the important role that tension or disequilibrium can play in growth, our fears often lead to nonaction or complicity. In other cases, we are caught between wanting to be truthful and wanting to protect someone else or their vulnerability.

We are also hesitant about speaking truthfully because we are not always sure we know what is true. We worry that we don't know the whole story or situation and

that we might be mistaken about the facts or the interpretation of them. In other situations, the line between truth-telling and tattling seems unclear. We do not want to develop a reputation as the truth police. Sometimes, however, we are simply lazy, and we do not care enough about individuals, the community, the truth or our own integrity to take on the challenges of being truthful.

"Telling the truth in love is, in my experience, the practice that the church carries out most poorly," noted one pastor. "We either shrink back from telling it because we don't want to drive people away, or we approach people with both guns blazing because we don't care about driving them away. . . . But you can't be a pastor with a passion for healthy community for very long without learning to develop this skill."

He described a recent situation at his church as an opportunity to engage in truth-telling. A member asked if she could teach a class that she thought would be of benefit to the community. He explained his dilemma:

> The problem is that this individual, while undoubtedly gifted in many ways for teaching, has a number of significant character issues. . . . She is a chronic church-hopper . . . she is quite harsh . . . people often feel abused and damaged by her. She is something of a bully . . . [but also] quite sensitive.

In response to the woman's request, the pastor met with her and raised two key issues: her erratic pattern of church attendance and her harsh and abusive manner. She responded well to both concerns, and the pastor agreed that she could teach the four-week class.

The undertaking did not go well at first. She blew up at the group when the attendance was poor. Though she apologized for the first incident, she became very angry again the following week. Group members then confronted her on specific issues, and she led the final session well. A person's gifts and flaws often come packaged together, and it is important to discern the difference between weakness and wickedness. Finding ways, as pastors and as congregations, to hold on to persons while speaking truthfully to them depends on deep commitments to love, fidelity and truthfulness.

Certain questions can help us explore our motives in telling the truth or in keeping it secret. For whom is this truth helpful? Who benefits when it is told or hidden? Who is harmed? Why do I or we want it known? If our ultimate purpose in truth-telling is helping persons and communities grow toward maturity in Christ, then our motives

need to be centered in a desire to strengthen people in goodness and godliness.

Offering hospitality

Jesus' message, as well as his life, death and resurrection, have shaped Christian understandings of hospitality. Two of his teachings are particularly formative for the tradition. In Matthew 25:31–46, Jesus tells a story in response to his disciples' question about recognizing signs of the end of the age (Matt. 24:3). He describes a scene of final judgment in which the sheep and the goats are separated on the basis of whether or not they had welcomed, fed and clothed the Son of Man. "I was hungry and you gave me food . . . a stranger and you welcomed me," explains Jesus. "Just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me." This passage is central to almost every teaching and tradition related to hospitality because it so closely links care for those in need with care for the Son of Man himself. Our response to the "least" is tied to our response to Jesus and to his response to us.

Jesus' teaching on the kingdom in Luke 14:12–14 provides the basis for another distinctive understanding of hospitality. At a dinner party he tells his host, "When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous."

Jesus calls for a practice that was as countercultural then as it is today. On the basis of these passages, the ancient church was convinced that Christians had to open their doors to poor people and to strangers.

In recent decades, attention to hospitality has increased, and its theological and human importance has again been recognized. Christian communities have formed around offering welcome to strangers. The Catholic Worker movement recovered the moral and practical significance of hospitality in the 1930s. L'Arche communities, founded by Jean Vanier, create a life in community with people with severe disabilities. Other communities welcome homeless people, students and seekers, street children and refugees.

The central importance of hospitality is also being recovered in congregations. We see fresh expressions of welcome when congregations make a place for unchurched children, international students and isolated older people. Congregations are building bridges to their larger communities as they offer weekly neighborhood meals and find opportunities to come alongside troubled families.

The practice is important not only for strangers and other vulnerable persons; it is also crucial for the life of a congregation itself. Hospitality is a means of grace for hosts as well as guests. Many people, after practicing hospitality, comment that they "got so much more than they gave" in welcoming a refugee family or in caring for a sick neighbor.

Often the best gift we can give another person is our time and attention. People come to life when they and their offerings are valued. This means that communities and the folks within them must be willing to receive. Only as we recognize our own vulnerabilities and incompleteness are we open to what others can contribute.

Beyond that, acts of hospitality are an opportunity to reflect on and to participate in the mutual welcoming and love evident in the life of the Trinity. As Miroslav Volf writes in *Exclusion and Embrace*: "Inscribed on the very heart of God's grace is the rule that we can be its recipients only if we do not resist being made into its agents; what happens to us must be done by us. Having been embraced by God, we must make space for others and invite them in—even our enemies."

When we offer welcome or live with gratitude, when we make and keep promises or live truthfully, we are responding to the practices of God. Our experiences of community grow out of the practices through which we echo the goodness, grace and truth we find in Jesus. We are not called to create ideal families, communities or congregations. Building faithful communities of truth and hospitality, however, is at the heart of our grateful response to the one who "became flesh and lived among us . . . full of grace and truth" (John 1:14).

This article is adapted from Christine Pohl's Living into Community: Cultivating Practices That Sustain Us, *just published by Eerdmans.*